

Wabash Cannonball

Lyrics: *Traditional*

Music: *Traditional*

Played once by the Grateful Dead on 11 June 1969 at a concert billed as "Bobby Ace And The Cards From The Bottom Of The Deck." No tape exists, so these are the lyrics from the version recently recorded by Bob Weir with Dan Zanes

From the great Atlantic Ocean to the wide Pacific shore
From the green and flowery mountains to the south belt by the shore
She's mighty tall and handsome, she's known quite well by all
She's a modern combination called the Wabash Cannonball

Chorus

Listen to the jingle, the rumble and the roar
As she glides along the woodlands, over hills and by the shore
Hear the mighty rush of the engine, hear the lonesome hobo's call
Travelling through the jungles on the Wabash Cannonball

Oh the Eastern States are dandy, so the Western people say
From New York to Chicago, and Rock Island by the way
From the hills of Minnesota where the rippling waters fall
No chances to be taken on the Wabash Cannonball

[chorus]

I rode the IC Limited, also the Royal Blue
Across the Eastern counties on the Elkhorn number two
I rode these highball trains from coast to coast, and that's all
But I have found no equal to the Wabash Cannonball

[chorus]

Here's to Daddy Claxton, may his name forever be
Always be remembered in the courts of Tennessee
His earthly race is over now, the curtains round him fall
They're carrying him home to victory on the Wabash Cannonball

[chorus]

Travelling through the jungles on the Wabash Cannonball

Grateful Dead-Related Recordings

<u>Date</u>	<u>Album</u>	<u>Recorded By</u>
2003	House Party	Dan Zanes (<i>with Bob Weir</i>) (note 1)

(1) also on the compilation Weir Here: The Best Of Bob Weir

Roots

An article in "Pickin' & Lickin'" in 1996 gave some fascinating background about the origins of the song. Thanks to the editor, Ada M. Prill for permission to quote extracts:

The old Wabash Railroad did run a real train called the Wabash Cannonball, but it came much later. The stories and the song were around quite a few decades earlier.

As folksinger, raconteur and railfan U. Utah Phillips explained in 1973, "In the 1880's the Wabash Cannonball was a mythological train made up by some bum somewhere, the train that any old hobo would ride on the way to his reward, wherever that might be. There never was a train called the Wabash Cannonball that went 'from the great Atlantic Ocean to the wide Pacific shore.' And there never was a train where a bum could get breakfast on the club car.

"As the song got more popular, the Wabash system in the Mid-west thought it was the smart thing to do to name its express run the Wabash Cannonball. It ran between Detroit and St. Louis until about three years ago." ...

The song "The Wabash Cannonball" probably evolved from a patriotic ditty that praised the Homestead Act of 1862. That was before it had anything to do with trains and hoboes, and it was variously called "Uncle Sam's Farm" or "Bounding U.S.A." In one version, the chorus went:

Come along, come along, make no delay
Come from every nation, come from every way
Our land is broad enough, so don't be alarmed
Uncle Sam is rich enough, he'll buy you all a farm

It took more than sixty years of the folk process metamorphosis before the first commercial recording of "The Wabash Cannonball" was made by the Carter Family for RCA in 1927.

The song was an instant hit, but the Carter Family's folksy old-time version didn't come close to selling the five-million-plus copies that Roy Acuff's version sold when he recorded it for Columbia nine years later. Although Acuff gave credit to the Carter Family--and paid them royalties--his tune was somewhat different, his tempo was more upbeat, and his instrumentation was more akin to modern country music. Also, many of his lyrics were rewritten.

Other versions of "The Wabash Cannonball" abound, often differing in the name of the legendary hobo who gets carried "home to Victory" once "the curtains 'round him fall." The Carter Family sang:

<https://www.whitegum.com/introjs.htm?/songfile/WABASH.HTM>

Oh, here's to Daddy Cleaton, may his name forever be
And long be remembered in the courts of Tennessee

Roy Acuff changed that to:

Here's to Daddy Claxton, may his name forever stand
And always be remembered in the courts of Alabam

(Roy's mother's maiden name was Claxton, so this could be a family reference, possibly to his own grandfather. Or maybe it was a little humor within the family.)

Folksong collector Alan Lomax published another version:

Now here's to Boston Blackey, may his name forever stand
And always be remembered by the 'boes throughout the land

After reading the article reproduced above, Alan Seltzer sent the following correction (slightly edited): Contrary to information that you've posted, the maiden name of Ida Acuff was not Claxton. It was Carr. However, Claxton was Roy Acuff's middle name. He was quoted in *Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy* by Dorothy Horstman as saying that he was middle-named Claxton by his father as a result of his father attending a lecture by a visiting professor named Claxton at a nearby college the week Roy was born [1903]. Roy's father was so impressed by the man that he middle-named Roy after him.

Roy Acuff does credit the Carter Family with the song, although there is some indication that it was much older than the Carter Family. However, Roy Acuff did pay royalties to the Carter Family after first recording the song in 1936, changing the name from Daddy Cleaton to Daddy Claxton. ... But he apparently took over from the Carters the fictional notion that Daddy Claxton "will always be remembered in the courts of our land." ... just as the Wabash Cannonball was a fictional train until the Wabash Railroad got around to renaming one of its trains in the 1950s. The song preceded the train by decades. *The full Carter Family lyrics are:*

Out from the wide Pacific to the broad Atlantic shore
She climbs the flowery mountain o'er hills and by the shore
Although she's tall and handsome and she's known quite well by all
She's a regular combination on the Wabash Cannonball

Oh the Eastern States are dandy, so the Western people say
Chicago, Rock Island, St Louis by the way
To the lakes of Minnesota where the rippling waters fall
No chances to be taken on the Wabash Cannonball

Oh listen to the jingle, the rumour and the roar
As she glides along the woodland, o'er hills and by the shore
She climbs the flowery mountain, hear the merry hobo's call
As she flies along the woodlands, the Wabash Cannonball

Oh here's old Daddy Cleaton, let his name forever be
And long be remembered in the courts of Tennessee
For he is a good old rounder 'til the curtain around him fall
He'll be carried back to victory on the Wabash Cannonball

I have rode the IC Limited, also the Royal Blue
Across the Eastern countries on L car number two
I have rode those highball trains from coast to coast that's all
But I have found no equal to the Wabash Cannonball

Oh listen to the jingle, the rumour and the roar
As she glides along the woodlands, o'er hills and by the shore
She climbs the flowery mountain, hear the merry hobo's call
As she flies along the woodlands, that Wabash Cannonball

Another verse that appears in some versions (eg Doc Watson's) is:

I went down to Birmingham one cold December day
When she pulled into that station, you could hear them people say
There's a fellow from North Carolina, he's long and he's tall
He came down to pick us a tune, he rode the Wabash Cannonball

"Bounding the U.S." was released on a Folkways LP in 1958 "Songs of a New York Lumberjack," by Ellen Stekert. It shows links to "Wabash Cannonball through lyrics such as:

From the great Atlantic Ocean where the sun begins to dawn
It heats the Rocky Mountains way out in Oregon

That verse also appears in "Uncle Sam's Farm" - one version of the full lyrics (credited to Jesse Hutchison Jr. with music by Nathan Barker) is:

Of all the mighty nations in the East or in the West
Oh this glorious Yankee nation is the greatest and the best
We have room for all creation and our banner is unfurled
Here's a general invitation to the people of the world

Chorus

Then come along, come along, make no delay
Come from every nation, come from every way
Our lands, they are broad enough--don't be alarmed
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm

St. Lawrence marks our Northern line as fast her waters flow
And the Rio Grande our Southern bound, way down to Mexico
From the great Atlantic Ocean where the sun begins to dawn
Leap across the Rocky Mountains far away to Oregon

[chorus]

While the South shall raise the cotton, and the West, the corn and pork
New England manufactories shall do up the finer work
For the deep and flowing waterfalls that course along our hills
Are just the thing for washing sheep and driving cotton mills

[*chorus*]

Our fathers gave us liberty, but little did they dream
The grand results that pour along this mighty age of steam
For our mountains, lakes and rivers are all a blaze of fire
And we send our news by lightning on the telegraphic wires

[*chorus*]

The brave in every nation are joining heart and hand
And flocking to America, the real promised land
And Uncle Sam stands ready with a child upon each arm
To give them all a welcome to a lot upon his farm

[*chorus*]

A welcome, warm and hearty, do we give the sons of toil
To come to the West and settle and labor on free soil
We've room enough and land enough, they needn't feel alarm
Oh come to the land of freedom and vote yourself a farm

[*chorus*]

Yes we're bound to lead the nations for our motto's "Go ahead"
And we'll tell the foreign paupers that our people are well fed
For the nations must remember that Uncle Sam is not a fool
For the people do the voting and the children go to school

[*chorus*]

Further Information

For more information on recordings see Matt Schofield's Grateful Dead Family Discography